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Brzezinski, on National Security Advisers

The following is adapted from an interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, that is to appear in the winter issue of The Washington Quarterly, published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, at Georgetown University. (Dr. Brzezinski, a senior adviser at the Center, is professor of government at Columbia University.) The interview, by the executive editor, Allen Weinstein, and another historian, Michael Beschloss, was conducted before the resignation, on Monday, of Richard V. Allen as President Reagan's national security adviser, the naming of William P. Clark Jr., Deputy Secretary of State, to replace him, and Mr. Reagan's decision to upgrade the adviser's position so that Mr. Clark would have a "direct reporting relationship to the President."

Question: Would you care to rank the recent national security advisers in order of effectiveness: Bundy, Rostow, Kissinger, Scowcroft — you could leave yourself out if you like — and Richard Allen?

Brzezinski: No, I won't do that. I think that the security adviser is so much an extension of the President that the way he functions is very much determined by the President's political style and the role he chooses for himself in the area of foreign policy. In other words, you cannot transpose the national security adviser from one President to another. If, for example, I were to say that Scowcroft was good under Ford, it does not follow that he would have been good under Nixon or Kennedy or Carter.

Under ideal circumstances I think that the system would work best if, in fact, an actively involved President of the Nixon, Carter, Kennedy type provided both strategic and tactical direction — and this then meant that the practical coordination and the definition of the strategic direction would originate from his assistant for national security affairs, who would then tightly coordinate and control the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and the director of Central Intelligence as a team, with them knowing that he was doing so on the President's behalf. Carter tried to have such a system, but at the same time he was so much afraid of the Kissinger shadow being replicated in some fashion, thereby jeopardizing his primacy, that he was never prepared openly to articulate it. Nonetheless, structually, he set up a system that was uniquely centralized.

The [National Security Council] operated on the basis of two committees: the policy review committee, which dealt with long-range policy issues and was typically chaired by a Cabinet secretary, most often the Secretary of State, and the special coordination committee that I chaired, which dealt with all arms-control issues in the American-Soviet relationship, with crisis management — and it had hundreds of meetings on ongoing crises in Afghanistan, Iran, Morocco, Poland, and so forth — and, finally, covert and sensitive activities. This gave the assistant to the President for national security considerable power. In addition to setting up this system, Carter made the assistant into a Cabinet member for the first time ever. That never happened before. Accordingly, the assistant chaired Cabinet-level committee meetings with the Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and others in attendance. Even under the Nixon system, the assistant only chaired under secretaries' meetings.

Finally, Carter made certain that before any of his Secretaries went abroad they received detailed letters of instruction telling them what they should say. And these letters were drafted at the White House. Their speeches were cleared in the White House, approved or disapproved or altered, and all important cables were cleared in the White House. Carter, quite rightly in my judgment, wanted it to be understood as *his* system, and therefore he wasn't prepared to make the assistant's role as explicit as perhaps it should have been; moreover, he wasn't prepared to make the personnel decisions that were necessary — namely, to purge those who really were not fully loyal to his views. And as a consequence, there was always practical bifurcation, ambiguity intensified by the emphasis placed publicly on the primacy of the Secretary of State.

Question: Under the conditions you have described, a revolution in the process of foreign policy decision-making was effected internally by Carter, but not acknowledged externally. One recalls the occasions on which he had a chance to make this clear to the press and the public and chose instead a studied ambiguity, the obfuscation that you described. Now after 11 months of the Reagan Administration, how do you evaluate the way this system has been functioning?

Brzezinski: I think it is the worst ever. For the following reasons. Though I have outlined to you what I think is the best system, I have to say that by and large since World War II we've had two systems. One is the Presidential, which approximates what I described as the best system, though in varying degrees, and that was characteristic of Carter, Nixon, and Kennedy. But, secondly, we had the Secretarial system, in which a relatively passive, disengaged President deliberately permitted his Secretary of State to be dominant. And that was used by Truman with Acheson, Eisenhower with Dulles, and Ford with Kissinger. I expected that with Reagan you would have the second system. And it is, I repeat, a perfectly respectable system. What amazes me is that we have neither the Presidential nor the Secretarial system.

Question: How would you describe it then?

Brzezinski: Well, chaos and confusion might be functional but uncharitable descriptions. Perhaps a more formal description would be to say a kind of feudal system approximating the Polish tradition of the *"liberum veto"* [by which a single dissenting nobleman could nullify a proposal accepted by a majority of his fellow nobles]. We have a Vice President in charge of a crisis committee, which means that he is in charge of a crisis in an area regarding which he'll have no ongoing policy involvement until the crisis appears. And no ongoing policy continuity once the crisis is terminated. A bureaucratic absurdity. We have a national security adviser reporting to a domestic adviser with no foreign policy experience. And a Secretary of

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